

Sustainable Agriculture & Rural Development in the United States: Progress and Priorities

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The major objective of SARD is to increase food production in a sustainable way and enhance food security. This will involve education initiatives, utilization of economic incentives and the development of appropriate and new technologies, thus ensuring stable supplies of nutritionally adequate food, access to those supplies by vulnerable groups, and production for markets; employment and income generation to alleviate poverty; and natural resource management and environmental protection (Agenda 21, Chapter 14)

Agriculture and rural development are sustainable when they are ecologically sound, economically viable, socially just, culturally appropriate, humane and based on a holistic, scientific approach (adapted from the definition of sustainable agriculture in the NGO Sustainable Agriculture Treaty, Global Forum at Rio de Janeiro, 1992).

Sustainable agriculture and rural development in the United States have come a long way since Agenda 21, although we have not completely reached any of the goals implicit in the “programme areas” of that document. This report summarizes contributions of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the United States (US) to achieving sustainable agriculture and rural development in the US and contributing to SARD globally, as part of the review of actions since the 2002 Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI), which is occurring during the 16th session of the Commission on Sustainable Development. It supplements the NGO Major Group paper, in which US contributions had to be listed very briefly because of overall space limitations. Given the increasing importance of NGOs in contributing to global assessment and planning for agriculture and rural development, and the powerful role of other actors within the United States in influencing progress and policies relevant to SARD around the world, a fuller treatment of US NGO actions and priorities than was possible in the Major Group paper seems warranted. Many of the actions and initiatives described in this paper started well before JPOI, but have gained momentum since then. In some cases, they may have been spurred by JPOI; but causal links between JPOI and progress on SARD in the US are difficult to demonstrate.

CONCRETE ACTIONS BY US NGOS SINCE 2002

Broadening of conceptual understanding of food systems and their far-reaching impacts. In the US, bridges have been built among NGOs that had previously worked in isolation with little intercommunication and shared advocacy or other actions. These NGOs serve agricultural, environmental, rural development, international development and public health interests. Examples of this new interaction include the Farm & Food Policy Project, a collaboration of more than 300 NGOs to influence the 2008 Farm Bill,

and cooperation between the American Public Health Association and groups working for community food security, nutrition and food safety. The concept of community food security has been spreading in the US through efforts of the Community Food Security Coalition, which has seen dramatic increases since 2002 in the number of attendees at annual conferences. At the local level, NGOs such as Just Food in New York City and the municipality-led Toronto Food Policy Council have initiated numerous programs based on an integrated approach to food security and sustainable agriculture. Collaborative campaigns such as the US Climate Action Network and Rising Tide-North America have begun recently to link food and agriculture with environmental justice, climate change and climate justice. National Catholic Rural Life Conference's Eating Is a Moral Act campaign has introduced ethical issues of current food systems practices to faith-based audiences. Public appreciation of the negative impacts of current global food systems and food policies on vulnerable people has been elevated by NGO publications since 2002, such as Like Machines in the Fields about farmworkers and Shut Out: How US Farm Programs Fail Minority Farmers by Oxfam America and Blood, Sweat and Fear: Workers' Rights in U.S. Meat and Poultry Plants by Human Rights Watch.

Development of alternative agrifood system networks. In counterpoint to the dominant US food system, NGOs have led the development of alternative food systems characterized by shorter supply chains, more democratic governance, more benign environmental impacts, greater equity and income security for workers and farmers, increased animal welfare and attention to community health and vitality. As these alternatives grow, citizens are gaining greater understanding of the diverse benefits of local and regional food systems. NGOs have developed new opportunities for rural areas through initiatives that keep the wealth within communities, such as locally owned and locally used biofuel from sustainably raised crops. Crossroads Resource Center has documented the mechanisms by which the US food system extracts wealth from rural economies, as farmers become increasingly dependent on inputs and markets outside their regions and consumers buy food imported long distances rather than relying more on local foods. New value chains; certification systems (such as domestic fair trade, Certified Humane Raised and Handled and Food Alliance); collaborations between farmers and chefs (such as Chefs Collaborative and Sustainable Table) and retail options such as mobile vegetable markets in low-income neighborhoods, community-owned groceries and buying clubs are creating mutually beneficial linkages between producers and consumers, with impetus and funding provided by NGOs. In many cases, consumers, land managers, conservationists, producers and others have established NGOs to advance their mutual interests; examples include the Southwest Grassfed Livestock Alliance. There has been a surge of growth in direct marketing (especially farmers' markets and Community-Supported Agriculture) across the US, the former supported by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) as well as NGOs. The Community Food Security Coalition successfully worked with partners inside USDA to create a federal funding program for Community Food Projects, which has allocated millions of dollars per year into NGOs that are trying to build alternative food systems and to a Food Security Learning Center based at World Hunger Year. New local food policy councils allow multistakeholder input to food policies, and sometimes have budgets to implement new programs.

Research and documentation of the value of agroecological approaches to food production has increased, spurred by NGO pressure on the land-grant university system. Effects of this pressure are apparent in the proliferation of sustainable agriculture centers and organic programs in US universities, augmenting research conducted by independent NGOs (such as the [Rodale Institute](#) and the [Organic Farming Research Foundation](#)). Their work has contributed to a growing body of evidence of positive ecological and sociocultural impacts of integrated, agroecological agricultural practices that protect ecosystem services, community welfare and animal welfare, in addition to providing food. NGOs have partnered with university faculty (such as by establishing the [Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture](#)) and staff from government agencies and professional organizations (such as by the Midwest Sustainable Agriculture Working Group's [Research & Extension Committee](#)) to encourage more investment in research and education directed at alternative food networks.

Responses to public health, environmental health, animal welfare, livelihood and social justice concerns about livestock production, such as the Farm Foundation's report on [The Future of Animal Agriculture in North America](#) and the Humane Society of the US's report, [The Impact of Animal Agriculture on Global Warming and Climate Change](#). The Pew Foundation's [National Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production](#) will publish its findings in April of 2008.

Promotion of new immigrant farmer programs by NGOs such as the [National Immigrant Farming Initiative](#) (NIFI), [Heifer International](#) and the Centro Internacional para el Desarrollo Rural Sostenible (CIDERS) in California.

Increasing consumer demand for products that are more sustainable, humane and/or healthy, designated with labels such as hormone-free, "GE-free", organic, grassfed, and fair-trade-certified. NGOs such as the [Organic Consumers Association](#), the [Center for Science in the Public Interest](#), [Consumers Union](#), [Slow Food USA](#), [Food & Water Watch](#) and the [Center for Food Safety](#) have spearheaded campaigns for more sustainable foods, while promoting the inseparability of food safety and environmental health. NGOs such as [Rural Advancement Foundation International](#) (RAFI-USA), the [Comité de Apoyo a los Trabajadores Agrícolas/Farmworker Support Committee](#), [Northeast Organic Farming Association](#) and [Florida Organic Growers/Quality Certification Services](#) have developed partnerships with food businesses and farmer co-ops to draft social justice standards and start pilot marketing programs. Many NGOs, including [Health Care without Harm-US](#), the [National Farm to School Program](#), (initiated by the Center for Food Justice and the Community Food Security Coalition) and [The Food Trust](#) are trying to improve diet quality for low-income people, especially children, through an array of practices such as linking farmers with school food system purchasers and improving retail grocery access in urban areas.

Conceptual development and implementation of food sovereignty by indigenous communities and their NGOs, such as by [Tohono O'odham Community Action's Community Food Systems Program](#), the [Taos Community Economic Development](#)

Corporation, the White Earth Land Recovery Project and First Nations Development Institute's Native Agriculture and Food Systems Initiative. A USDA-funded NGO partnership with the tribal community college in the Tohono O'odham Nation documented that its people suffer the highest rate of adult-onset diabetes in the world, with half of the population now suffering from the disease. They attribute this devastating crisis to the destruction of traditional food systems and diet. Several scientific studies have confirmed that traditional O'odham foods help to regulate blood sugar and significantly reduce the effects of diabetes.

Greater cooperation and solidarity between North American NGOs active in food and agriculture and international organizations working on food sovereignty, promoted by publications from Food First and the Institute for Agriculture Trade & Policy on dumping and food sovereignty; publicity from the National Family Farm Coalition; and participation of North American NGO representatives at Nyéléni, which resulted in the first articulation of a North American food sovereignty agenda.

Resistance to increasing agribusiness concentration and growing understanding of agribusiness profiteering from the food system. This understanding and related action have been supported by NGOs participating in the Agribusiness Accountability Initiative, which offers a clearinghouse and sponsors events to bring together activists. NGOs including the National Family Farm Coalition and Missouri Rural Crisis Center have supported an array of initiatives to help family farmers and rural communities overcome negative impacts of agribusiness activities. NGOs such as the Sierra Club, the Center for Food Safety, Western Organization of Resource Councils, National Family Farm Coalition and Beyond Pesticides led resistance to approval of genetically-engineered alfalfa and wheat, in part because they perceived encroachment of GE crops in the US to be a strategy for agribusiness domination of the seed market.

Resistance to the free trade agenda and support for fair trade. Growing numbers of NGOs are getting involved in international trade negotiations, frequently in protest against harmful impacts of free trade policies on farmers and ranchers in both the US and developing countries. For example, the National Family Farm Coalition, Rural Coalition, Missouri Rural Crisis Center and the Organization for Competitive Markets opposed CAFTA; and a new Coalition for a Prosperous America is bringing together manufacturers and farmers concerned about free trade. NGOs including the Institute for Agriculture & Trade Policy have attempted to document the impacts of NAFTA on SARD in both the US and developing countries, and sponsored convenings of NGO representatives from the three countries of North America.

CONSTRAINTS AND OBSTACLES TO PROGRESS ON JPOI IN NORTH AMERICA

Climate change and other environmental constraints (e.g., water shortages, water contamination, eutrophication of water sources, loss of farmland through development for industry or residences, soil loss through erosion) impose growing constraints on the implementation of SARD in the US. However, sociopolitical obstacles are of at least

equal importance. These include competition for land and other resources between food production and biofuels, which has driven up food and commodity prices around the world in the last couple of years. They also include the loss of farmer knowledge as older farmers die and traditional chains of succession weaken because fewer farm children want to stay in farming. They include subsidies that encourage farm concentration and consolidation of existing power blocs through corporate concentration that does not share benefits of scale with producers and consumers. In particular, large-scale industrialized livestock systems are spreading in the US, as well as in developing countries, with concomitant health, animal welfare and food safety hazards. Current farm policies in the US Farm Bill continue to support the overproduction of commodity crops and direct payments to large-scale farms, and do not provide adequate funds for sustainable agriculture and innovative rural development programs that would keep more wealth derived from rural assets in rural communities. These policies continue in part because the current US administration has other priorities that contrast with priorities of most NGOs, such as promotion of multilateral and bilateral free trade agreements, resistance to cooperation with other countries and lack of adherence to international treaties and agreements protecting human rights and the environment.

LESSONS LEARNED AND PRIORITY APPROACHES

Benefits and costs of the current food system depend tremendously on the vantage point of the actor; and “average” gains can mask increasing vulnerability, poverty and environmental damage. NGOs point to anecdotal evidence of problems for vulnerable people, but need stronger differentiated analyses of impacts of current food system practices according to factors that lead to greater vulnerability or impact. These might help to illuminate ways that the food system helps to perpetuate, or even exacerbates, chronic poverty in rural counties of the Midwest, Southwest, Appalachian and Southeast regions. A gender differentiated impact analysis of the current food system is a priority. This would consider impacts of current practices and alternatives on women as family farmers; migrant farm workers; rural inhabitants; workers in food processing plants, grocery chains and fast food chains; and consumers to inform policy advocacy, capacity building and appropriate investments.

More equitable sharing of resources and power, allowing access by people who have previously been disenfranchised or excluded, is essential to meet development and sustainability goals. Food and fuel sovereignty, a concept initiated by NGOs, is becoming an overarching theme of NGOs for decision-making about use of resources and labor. It highlights the importance of producers having fair access to the resources they need, including information, financing and markets. In particular, support is needed to ensure access by beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers, and to create capacity for local production and marketing. Some promising approaches include technology transfer through peer-to-peer networks and partnerships, with shared ownership or open-source technology. This may require reform of existing Intellectual Property Rights, which tend to give advantages to large investors and companies. NGOs are concerned about the growing power of agribusiness over inputs, food and fuel processing and distribution, and

retailing. Priority approaches for dealing with this issue include institutional arrangements that give farmers, farmworkers, rural citizens and NGOs representing them more voice in decisions that affect them. Examples of this approach are tri-national alliances among NGOs in North America to address the new challenges from bilateral and multilateral trade agreements.

Capacity building, particularly at the local and regional levels, is a necessary balance to the US focus on export-oriented agriculture and mechanisms by which wealth is extracted from rural economies. Local and regional capacity building by NGOs involves at least four interconnected aspects:

- a) Creating and enhancing rural infrastructure and social services, including infrastructure for local and regional marketing;
- b) Leadership development and technical assistance for youth, women and minority populations, particularly to sustain small-scale and mid-scale farms and other agricultural enterprises;
- c) Setting up new governance mechanisms and partnerships that facilitate links between local practice and policy at all levels; and
- d) Improving the transparency of information and encouraging participatory approaches to information generation and decisions about what information should be developed with public funding.

Integration of local, traditional and indigenous sources of knowledge with scientific knowledge enables more resilient agricultural practices, adapted to local constraints. Community-based and indigenous practices of food production are often better adapted to local conditions and more adaptable to changing climatic conditions than practices developed in other locales and focused primarily on increasing yields. Different sources of knowledge complement each other; none is sufficient in itself. Participatory approaches to research, technology development and evaluation are needed to integrate local and traditional with scientific knowledge.

Greater attention to food quality, health and preserving traditional foods and agrobiodiversity (landraces, heirloom varieties, minor breeds, etc.) can help reverse trends toward obesity/overweight and the growing distance between people and their food. Community-based organizations and foundations have focused over the past couple of years in particular on the impacts of highly processed food of low nutrient density on the health of children and low-income communities burdened by chronic diet-related disease and higher risk for obesity. The causes of obesity, overweight and diet-related diseases are complex; and a diversity of approaches to ameliorate these problems is advisable. These include providing more culturally appropriate and healthy food choices through food service and emergency food assistance, and providing incentives to farmers to produce and sell more fresh, high-quality fruits and vegetables in local and regional markets.

Agroecological approaches and diversified agricultural production systems are vital for sustainability and resilience in food systems. With better understanding of the negative environmental impacts of agricultural practices that are still widespread in the

United States (such as the huge “Dead Zone” in the Gulf of Mexico, created in large part by nutrient run-off from agricultural fields in the Midwest) and better understanding of the yield potential of sound agroecological approaches, the advantages of agroecological approaches have become clearer. It is not necessary to sacrifice environmental quality and maintenance of ecosystem services, such as biodiversity conservation, water conservation and carbon sequestration, to achieve high yields and food security. In fact, soil fertility and the diversity of ecosystem services essential for agricultural production are only possible to maintain in the long term through agroecological approaches such as conservation agriculture, crop rotations, holistic management, biocontrol and other methods of environmentally sensitive pest control, use of green manures and other organic fertilizers rather than sole reliance on synthetic fertilizers, and sustainable livestock production, including pasture-based and rotational systems. A promising approach is setting up new mechanisms to fully value and pay for ecosystem services provided on working lands. This contrasts with incentives to exploit natural resources for short-term profits.

POTENTIAL AREAS TO MOBILIZE FOR FURTHER ACTION

Collaborate in planning, information, assessment and governance across sectors and interest groups not previously involved in agricultural practice and policy. Such collaboration by NGOs will continue existing projects and international forums, such as specifically linking practice to policy at all levels (see, for example, the “[practice to policy](#)” website established by International Partners for Sustainable Agriculture). There is potential to expand this work by establishing new local and regional governance mechanisms for food and agricultural planning and policy development, and building greater solidarity across national boundaries to increase the social welfare of disadvantaged groups and explore potential areas for improvement.

Develop reliable, credible sources of information about diverse, agroecological approaches and ensure widespread access to them. These might include clearinghouses and peer-to-peer mechanisms for sharing information. Indicators of effective multistakeholder processes that serve sustainable development could help document their success or weak areas.

Scale up exemplary models of SARD to serve more people in more areas. Particular needs include identifying different models of local and regional food systems, figuring out where each is appropriate, assessing gaps in infrastructure and institutional support and coordinating policy development with innovative programs.

Advocate at all political levels for greater investment in capacity building, participatory approaches and sharing power and decision making authority with local communities. This will dovetail with promotion of anti-trust measures, increased market competition, greater transparency in corporate practices and fuller corporate social reporting. Another approach to more democratic decision making on important

food system and rural development issues is establishment of an international technology assessment body with multistakeholder representation.

Reform agricultural policies to provide incentives for public health, environmental quality, animal welfare and community vitality. This can be achieved through continued bridge building across NGOs and between NGOs and other actors within government, professional societies and other branches of civil society, to increase political power and awareness of effective strategies.